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AVERTING OUR GAZE:

PASSING IN THE LIVES OF WHITE, WORKING CLASS LESBIANS

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A THESIS TO COMPLETE THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR A MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE IN THEOLOGY
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Mother, I learned to lie to you
in the early morning of my life.

When women flooded my hands like icy waters
lies were my shelter.

When women blew across my body like storm winds
lies were my shelter.

When women struck my heart like lightning
lies were my shelter.

Mother, I learned to lie to you
lies were my shelter
in the early morning
of my life.

"Shelter," Julie Wilson, 1990

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* When stimulating and creative work is being done, "erons" are emitted.

PREFACE

This master's thesis initiates a proposed, four part exploration of passing in the lives of white, working class lesbians. I posit that both class location and sexuality are issues of survival in contemporary U.S. society--a society based on racism, classism, and heterosexism. The purpose of this thesis is to begin chapter one, which defines analytical constructs related to the issue of passing.

I start research for the remaining three chapters fall of 1991 in my PhD program at Emory University in Atlanta. The second chapter documents institutional constraints in the lives of white, working class lesbians. Its purpose, as well, will be to illustrate ways these women have resisted oppression in their churches, schools, workplaces and the like. Chapter three asks the question, what is white, working class lesbian culture? Interviews and survey data will provide the resources for answering this question. The concluding chapter calls for collective action; it raises up the white, working class lesbian "ethic of good will." With this ethic as a constructive guide, chapter four proposes life-affirming strategies and sets strategic priorities for survival in, and transformation of, a hostile world.

I consider this project critically important, not only for my own survival as a white, working class lesbian, but particularly as I see its relationship to the state of contemporary U.S. society. Our most recent national crisis (the Gulf war) glaringly exposes the need for this kind of research--

studies that determine which people (and how many of them) remain gagged by dominant attitudes and appearances touted as universal by an exploitative, thoroughly militarized social structure. Certainly, exploring the issue of passing proves a challenging task in this context.

I answer this challenge with a determination based on generations of silence. Janet Zandy, in her book Calling Home writes, "For working class women, writing or telling one's story, breaking the silence. . . is an individual act of courage." (*) I would add as well that such valor always springs forth from a community context. It requires much nurturing. Those of us who speak emerge from lovingly tended seeds, sown long ago. Certainly, no one person can speak for any other, even within the same community. I speak for myself. I am white, working class, and lesbian. I respectfully heed the words of my Gramma, who told me many times, "bloom where you're planted."

* Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writings, edited by Janet Zandy, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1990, page 6.

INTRODUCTION

> In the nighttime on my Gramma's land
> comes the prayer to stand on
> when I'm reachin' up
> to take all the stars from this Kansas sky
>
> and throw them up so high
> they come down on this godforsaken kingdom
> like chunks of lead light.1

Social location, that process by which an individual or community places their experience in a particular context, considers objectivity an unattainable ambition. Claiming to remain uninfluenced by emotion or personal prejudice sabotages serious discussion of contestable issues. The critical naming of social location settles one's feet on the earth; it brushes dust from the map of the world, exposing the positions and boundaries of identity; it acknowledges the fact that no human looks down on others from the lofty heights of a heavenly sphere. Shaped by many factors, such as race, sex, class, and sexual orientation, social location is the site from which we gaze. Feminist ethicist Beverly W. Harrison says that this point of departure shapes our moral sensibilities. She stresses that social location ". . . involves naming structures that create the social privilege we possess as well as understanding how we have been victims."[2]

As the cornerstone of U.S. society, the structure of white privilege holds in place a weighty system of social, political, and economic domination, where whites benefit from advantages held as an exclusive right guaranteed by virtue of race. This privilege manifests itself in laws and traditions protecting what

a dictatorial class of people consider their due. "White," sometimes termed "caucasian," designates the primary racial/ethnic identity of those who rule western "civilization." Rarely an identifiable skin color, white guarantees life-long prerogatives; it presumes the self-determination of adulthood, as in the racist phrase "free, white, and over 21." White children are taught to believe that other people have racial/ethnic identities, and that they remain unsoiled by one. Peggy McIntosh, in her article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," explains this structure:

> . . . whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege. . . I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.[3]

Like invisible ink, the concept "white" drips onto every page of every book and dissolves there--although white people may try to write over it, denying its existence, white saturates each thought, each supposedly objective argument.[4] A thunderous silence, white need not speak to be heard.[5]

The frame of U.S. society, that skeletal structure designed to give shape or support, consists of a stratification of social classes by economic, political, and cultural characteristics, largely determined by virtue of birth.[6] Stacked top to bottom, this hierarchical system insures that people in the upper echelons benefit from the labor and resources of people in the lower levels. Classism--discrimination or prejudice based on class location--permeates this structure.[7]

The mythology of upward mobility operates as a linchpin to hold these layers in place. Upward mobility boasts that anyone in the U.S. who tries hard enough can rise from one social class to another. When an individual or community attempts to live out this myth (primarily to procure basic human rights), it becomes devastatingly clear that upward mobility obscures a rigidly fixed, classist structure. Although many people still cling to this myth, most U.S. families have not changed classes for centuries.[8]

No stronger example exists to illustrate the static nature of class location than the maternal branch of my own family. The Gfeller's trace their ancestry to one Burchard Geveller, who in 1301 was living on his own farm three miles south of Walkringen, Switzerland. Six hundred and ninety (690) years later, my grandmother Ida Elizabeth Gfeller (wife of Louis) lives on her own farm as well, five miles northeast of Abilene, Kansas. Geographical location stands as the only significant change in nearly seven centuries--what better proof to suggest class stratification remains consistent over generations.[9]

In order to work effectively, the linchpin of upward mobility must be constructed from the strong stuff of dreams. Taking advantage of people's healthy desire for self-improvement, those few families who benefit from class privilege[10] manufacture a white, middle class ethos, which encourages the belief that all citizens hold membership in what is called "the middle class."[11] This ethos propagandizes the principles of social equality inherent in the concept of "democracy," while it paradoxically insists that women are inferior to men and "white is right." A

dangerous system of so-called "principles," it holds an unjust structure in place by obscuring racial, ethnic, and class location and by clouding class antagonism.

It also encourages cultural hegemony. An agenda representing the interests of those who set themselves up as rulers, cultural hegemony includes the imperative that "leaders" continue to benefit socially, politically, and economically from a power differential in U.S. society. These rewards depend upon the continued exploitation of workers, from whose labors the governing profit, thus deriving their leisure.[12] Cultural hegemony touts itself as "common-sense," the natural order of things. It arrogantly co-opts the creative and intellectual energy of other cultures and twists it into a noose of dominant behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, and institutions.

Under a thick cloud of mystification, with their necks caught in the noose of cultural hegemony, stands the working class.[13] Rarely do these folks identify as such. When they do, cultural hegemony is prepared to convince them they are actually middle class, or on their way up an easily scaled success ladder. Unfortunately, because of the grueling reality of exploitative labor, working class vision is already obscured by a slumped posture; those who bear the heavy burden of producing goods and services remain bent over, crushed beneath the weight of other people riding on their backs.[14]

Undergirding the weighty structure of racist and classist exploitation, heterosexism provides critical support for U.S. cultural hegemony. Heterosexism is discrimination or prejudice

based on sexual orientation and gender. Its foundational principle proclaims a distinction between women and men, assuming a differentiated instinct, intellect, and ability. Inherent in this dissimilarity is the presumption of male superiority.[15]

Heterosexism builds on this male/female dualism to then categorize sexual orientation. It considers heterosexuality--characterized by attraction to the opposite sex--ethically and innately superior to lesbian and gay sexuality--which is characterized by attraction to the same sex.

Perpetuated by U.S. institutions, heterosexism wields considerable power. The practice of marriage provides a useful illustration of this influence. Marriage law legitimates the union of a woman and man, yet considers same sex covenants illegal. This discriminatory law births other legislation, such as tax and insurance law, that favors heterosexual unions.[16]

However, because of the underlying agenda of male supremacy, these unions do not guarantee equality for women. In a heterosexist context it is significant that, when married, the majority of women relinquish their "maiden name." Every marriage is a marriage of convenience for men; these unions are prearranged for their politial, economic, and social benefit.[17]

Supporting this hidden agenda of male domination, the church provides a holy sanction for male/female joinings. Priests and ministers co-opt the power of the voice of God. They declare heterosexuals who live together out of wedlock, sinful. They demonize lesbian and gay sexuality and cast it out of their very midst. In this calculated way, institutions like the government and church work together to insidiously insure that men, and the

heterosexual unions which benefit them, reign supreme.

The monolithic institutions of racism, classism, and heterosexism forcefully shape our personal lives. For example, although white, I only began to understand the importance of identifying as such after hearing the question, "when did you first recognize the privilege of being white in this society?" Until then, I existed in the powerful bliss of ignorance. Never in my schooling did I hear "white" discussed as a racial/ethnic

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identity. Everywhere it seemed as though race was an inappropriate, impolite subject for discussion. I suppose this makes sense, because the hateful racism perpetuated by white people throughout history gives us much to conceal, much about which to be morally embarrassed and ashamed. Today, naming my whiteness operates as an ethical imperative; pretending to be objective, pretending to be "color-blind," I believe fatally flaws any analysis.

Remembering the awakening of my working class consciousness causes pain; like a numb limb returning to life, the memory stings. Assigned in a class the task of designing my "dream job"--that work I would do if I had all the resources and money in the world--I drew a blank. Given one week to work on this project, I couldn't think of a thing. I also thought it didn't upset me; yet in class the next week, when everyone else outlined elaborate, imaginative plans, I felt ashamed and unintelligent. I still had written nothing. Twenty-seven years old at the time, I found out then how severely class injury stifles the creative,

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liberative imagination. When the limbs of my critical

consciousness rose from sleep, I used them to uncover my heritage as a working class woman, a child of generations of farmers.

I discovered my lesbian identity quite differently, at age sixteen. I'll never forget driving through a rainstorm down a Kansas highway and feeling a rush of strong, confused emotions about my best friend. Suddenly, my body registered a sincere shock, and I thought to myself, "I love her," and knew this love was what women were supposed to feel for men. So, even though many years passed before I became involved with a woman, I held onto a clear sense of my lesbian sexuality. I'm not sure how I did this. My sexuality wasn't informed by words, because in the context of the early 1970's, lesbian and gay people were invisible in Dickinson county, Kansas. No one said the words "gay" or "lesbian," even perjoratively. I learned what homophobia was from what remained unsaid. My lesbianism did not involve a conversion experience; since I never became involved with men, it lacked the elements of transformation. Rather, it feels to me like I simply unfolded into my authentic self.[20]

My social location as white, working class, and lesbian keenly informs my experience of contemporary U.S. society. A tendency to pass, in terms of concealing my identity, stems from my fear of hostile institutions that manufacture a violent, propagandistic ethos of white, middle class superiority.[21] This ethos incites and sanctions hostility against those of us who seem different; its existence supports my conviction that class status and sexual identity are survival issues.

To further substantiate my claim I undertake in this thesis the first step of a thorough sociohistorical analysis. This analysis aims to pull apart the enmeshed layers of the social and historical realities of being white, working class, and lesbian in contemporary U.S. society.

I seek to reveal the deadly nature of institutions hostile to white, working class lesbians by examining the ways those of us with such a social location respond to them. Certainly, one primary way we respond is by playing the dangerous game of concealed identites called passing. A careful study of passing, then, must include an examination of our behaviors and attitudes. This examination must begin with a clear definition of passing, as well as other behaviors, attitudes, and/or institutions relating to passing. In this thesis, I define the issue of passing itself, and include two other issues for clarification of the sociohistorical reality of life as a white, working class lesbian--assimilation and internalized oppression.

A thorough definition of passing is presented as the first section in this work. I look to literature, formative thinker Carter Heyward, and narratives from my survey on white, working class lesbians to flesh out this much used, but rarely defined, concept.

I follow this definition of passing with a section on assimilation. This part of the thesis serves a dual purpose. Meant as a contrast to passing, it also operates as a further definition of assimilation in contemporary U.S. society. Exploration of this issue is fundamental to the study of passing. One reason is because many people use the words passing and

assimilation interchangeably. I seek to point out the danger of this mis-naming.

To further flesh out the study of passing, I examine in the last section one prevalent behavior in the white, working class lesbian community--the internalization of oppression. The noxious fumes of oppression actually enter the body of white, working class lesbians and cause us to abuse ourselves and one another. Internalized oppression has much to do with the issue of passing.

In the conclusion to this work I seek to outline the white, working class lesbian ethic, which I call an ethic of "good will." This is a "working title" for this ethic, and as I continue this work in my PhD program I hope a more appropriate naming will emerge. I feel that an exploration of this ethic will give white, working class lesbians a resource for constructing productive, transformative survival strategies.

PART I -- PASSING

> Passing is a costume I put on and take off when I need it; sometimes it is hastily thrown on, and just enough to get by. Other times, however, it is a carefully constructed and made up facade. I can't seem to get passing out of my psychological, social and actual wardrobe.1

Those of us who socially locate as white, working class lesbians often demonstrate a tendency to pass. We pretend to identify with governing cultural assumptions of white, middle class, and heterosexual behavior. Our passing is informed by the stark reality that class status and sexual identity are survival issues in contemporary U.S. society.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines passing as "death." In common speech, this definition remains consistent; the word "passing" most often finds usage in euphemistic references to physical death, such as "passing on" and "passing away". The Random House Dictionary defines "passing" as, "to let go without notice; leave unconsidered; disregard; overlook; to cause or allow to go through or over a barrier." A Feminist Dictionary quotes Liz Stanley and Joan Nestle, who explain it as a survival strategy.[2] They write, "Long used by Blacks and gays. . . passing may also refer to lesbians who pass for straight or to lesbians 'who look like men to the straight world'."[3]

The concept of passing originates in the African-American community, where lightness of skin often means survival in a eurocentric, white-supremacist world. Borrowed by other oppressed groups, such as the lesbian and gay community, this concept characterizes the experiences of marginalized people

attempting to survive in U.S. society--a society that by all indications considers the ethos of white, middle class reality the norm.[4] Like the carpenter's square (that L-shaped instrument for drawing and testing right angles), norms characterize those ethical standards, patterns, and models considered typical in contemporary U.S. society. Norms evaluate the individual's fit, constantly estimating one's ability to socially belong.

In the novel entitled Passing, author Nella Larsen's exploration of racial passing in the 1920's further describes the concept of passing through the lives of Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield. Both African-American women, Clare plays a dangerous game as she passes for white and marries a white man, and Irene lives with the fear her friend will be discovered.[5] At one point in the novel, Irene visits Clare. Upon first meeting Clare's white husband, John Bellew, Irene passes for white as well, and feels, "A faint sense of danger [brush] her, like the breath of a cold fog."[6]

Bellew's racism showers like hateful sparks[7] throughout his conversation, and the particular irony that he is married to an African-American woman and doesn't know it is illustrated when Clare playfully asks him, "'What difference would it make if, after all these years, you were to find out that I was one or two per cent coloured?'" His answer confirms Irene's worst fears for Clare's future, "'I know you're no nigger, so it's all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that."[8]

The fact that John Bellew cannot see people of color at all,

even those in his own life, parallels the invisibility of lesbians in contemporary heterosexist society. May Sarton, in her novel The Education of Harriet Hatfield, illustrates this invisibility and shows how it contributes to the concept of passing. The main character Harriet--a white, upper class lesbian--spends her life living comfortably in Chestnut Hill, an affluent suburb of Boston. A thirty-year relationship with her lover Vicky remains unacknowledged by her family or friends. She shatters this invisibility after the death of her lover, by opening a women's bookstore and coming out as a lesbian to herself, her family, old friends, and an often hostile public.

When considering whether or not to disclose her lesbianism to her brother, Harriet thinks to herself, "The very idea makes me physically uncomfortable. . . My family had seemed to take for granted that Vicky and I were partners and had never asked an embarrassing question. And Vicky would have lied if they had probed. . ."[9] In this way, Harriet and Vicky's lesbian relationship never challenges the dominant, heterosexist attitude in their white, upper class social setting. Their very invisibility informs their passing, and vice versa. When attempting to define passing, one must always look for its relationship to an invisibility that discounts lesbian lives.

The way those who use passing weave together invisibility and illusion is well illustrated in the story of Ellen Craft and her husband William, who in 1848 used passing as a survival strategy to escape slavery. An African-American woman, Ellen passed as a white, male, invalid slaveowner on a journey from Georgia to Philadelphia. Her husband posed as her black, male

slave. William speaks here of a particularly harrowing moment, when Ellen must quickly add another strategy to her passing repertoire in order to elude capture:

> As soon as the train had left the platform, [Ellen] looked round in the carriage, and was terror-stricken to find a Mr. Cray--an old friend of [her] master, who dined with the family the day before, and knew my wife from childhood--sitting on the same seat. . . [She] resolved to feign deafness as the only means of self-defense.[10]

This story well demonstrates the risks involved in passing. Kore Archer, in an essay about this brave escape, elaborates, "And if their plan failed? They must have been well aware that Ellen's fair skin would fetch her master a pretty price in the brothels of Natchez or New Orleans. At the very least, they risked never seeing each other again."[11] What a cruel decision for two people to have to make! Passing never presupposes success; it always attempts to balance the assumptions of a dominant society that feed illusions with the hard realities of the costs of being uncloaked and punished.

As shown through literature and oral history, different voices describe passing in different ways. Yet, a common story emerges, and it tells us that the extent to which passing is used always indicates the loss of power a person or community is suffering in relation to dominant norms.

In her book Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God, Carter Heyward discusses sexuality from a feminist liberation theology perspective.[12] Heyward, a white, middle class, lesbian priest, mentions passing in this work. She admits, "In 1979, part of me still wanted to 'pass.' Today I am

clear that I don't pass in relation to the norms of dominant political, theological, or psychological culture. . . Coming out moves me further, a day at a time, into the realization that I don't want to pass."[13]

An interview with Carter Heyward, specifically dealing with the matter of passing, points out the many serious complexities of this issue, even in the experience of a lesbian theologian who is out in her professional and personal lives.[14] She says, "I define passing negatively, as . . . choosing to refuse to be who I am in a public mode, and in that sense, refusing to embody the struggle for lesbian and gay justice. Passing is hiding. It's death. When I am not passing, when I am really out, I feel most alive."[15]

She elaborates her definition like this, "When I'm passing, I know I'm not as alive. My passion is not being generated, my energy is not as accessible. My creativity is dulled. Passing cuts and diminishes my own capacity to be a creative theologian, a lively person."[16]

Heyward's comments support as well the fact that the concept of passing originates in the African-American community. "I first heard the term "passing" used in reference to black people passing as white. Growing up in the South. . . I remember hearing about it. I didn't know anybody who did it. That was part of the phenomenon of course, you didn't know who passed. Passing was about secrecy, hiddenness, lying."[17]

This "not knowing" who is and is not passing contributes to the enforced invisibility of marginalized groups in the U.S.

Lesbians certainly move invisibly, and Heyward asserts a truth familiar to most lesbians, "In heterosexist patriarchy the assumption shared by most folks, 24 hours a day, is that we're not lesbians unless we are actually naming ourselves as such."

Naming lesbianism a reality proves a difficult task even for the most out lesbian, and even in the most mundane of situations. When discussing trips out shopping at the grocery store, for example, Heyward admits, ". . . I'm aware of the fact that I tend not to do things that would necessarily draw attention to my being a lesbian, not snuggling up to my lover and holding her hand, for instance. That's not even a very conscious decision in the realm of public life. But it is nonetheless a decision, and so, in that sense I do pass for straight. . ."

When asked about the gains and losses of passing, Heyward is quick to make it clear that not passing allows her a freedom of psychic and spiritual movement. She states, "It's very wonderful not to feel that I have to hide, or pull punches or . . . be careful in that sense."[18]

"Of course, coming out has involved some losses," admits Heyward, "I don't have a lot of professional mobility, for example, and I don't have much professional credibility in the circles that I once really wanted to be affirmed in. . .[yet], I am deeply affirmed in other circles. I experience genuine gratitude for the work I do, and that's very important to me."[19]

Finding professional affirmation proved challenging for Heyward. She expresses it this way, "It's been a long, slow, painful lesson for me, learning where my self-esteem is rooted, and how to value myself as a theologian."

If coming out as a lesbian is indeed, as Heyward ultimately makes clear in her interview, well worth it, why then does passing still remain so present in her life and the lives of other lesbians? Her answer expresses a sad and dangerous truth. She says:

> There's so much pressure being put on by the church and the larger society for people to be silent, to shut up and not be "out" about anything. To conform. To get in there and do our duties. It really is very fascist. Dorothee Solle speaks of "christo-fascism"[20] and that's right where we are now: We're being asked to march in lock-step, and any of us who dare deviate, who dare to step to one side or the other. . . are going to have to pay for it.

The strength and urgency of Carter Heyward's voice makes it clear that passing must be added to the ethical canon of critical, contestable issues in contemporary U.S. society. Certainly, passing plays different roles in different lives; yet, it consistently contributes to the painful shape-shifting of individuals and communities struggling for survival under a siege of strictly measured, dominating attitudes.

As one of these struggling communities, white, working class lesbians often play along with the illusion of being middle class and heterosexual. When overbearing attitudes assume everyone shares this identity, anyone different feels pressure. Poet Audre Lorde explains that western eurocentric society will always handle human differences in one of three ways, "ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate."[21] The harsh reality of this attitude creates an atmosphere where reactions to class location and sexuality become issues of survival. Hostile

reactions foster an environment pressuring white, working class lesbians to pass.

Violence against lesbians and gay men testifies to the fact that our lesbian sexuality threatens our very lives. In his book Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men, Gary Comstock analyzes thirty-two surveys having to do with violence targeted at lesbian and gay people. He draws tentative conclusions that speak dramatically about the risk of disclosing a gay or lesbian identity. He summarizes, ". . . slightly more than half [my emphasis] of socially active lesbians and gay men . . . experience some form of anti-gay/lesbian violence." Interestingly, he also finds that, "more women from lower-class backgrounds. . . fall within the general anti-gay/lesbian violence category than do those from other class backgrounds."[22]

Cited as a primary motivation for passing, the fear of physical violence permeates the responses of ten women who participated in my study of white, working class lesbians.[23] In this survey (that, incidently, asked no direct questions about lesbian and gay violence), over and over women expressed concern that their lesbian identity would incite attack. One woman writes, "I feel most pressured to pass when I feel threatened--[my lover] and I took the pink triangle off the truck when we moved [to a new neighborhood]."

Another woman flatly states, "[I feel most motivated to pass] when I'm in danger--around mysogynist and homophobic men--I feel that it would encourage violence to be overtly lesbian."

"The only situations where I have found myself making any real attempt to pass were conversations being held in public

places," states one woman, ". . . I do not experience 'the outside world' as a safe place, and therefore, I find it more threatening, especially with gay bashing on the increase."

Interestingly, one woman who came out as a lesbian in college now passes at her workplace because of her fears of violence. She writes, "Nowadays, I feel more frightened about potential punishment for being a lesbian, so I don't come out as much at work."

Passing logically operates as a survival strategy. It plays a sheltering role in the lives of white, working class lesbians, as it protects those of us who live outside of middle class and heterosexual experience from storms of hatred and bigotry--that is, as long as we believably play act that we are what we are not.

Another kind of violence threatens those of us in working class communities. These noxious fumes infiltrate our lives. For example, many of us remember, as children, the terrible work-related accidents that happened sometimes to our parents, often to our relatives or neighbors. And these accidents still happen.[24]

The suffocation of my uncle Kenny in the alfalfa mill; the crushed hip of my Grampa Gfeller (bedridden for twelve years from a tractor wreck)[25]; what Janet Zandy, in her essay "Labor Day" describes as the chemical burns on her father's body--these incidents herald a brutally clear message. Moving up socially, rising into the vocations of another class, becomes critical for the survival of working class people. This desire to, as my

mother encourages, "move up and out," represents not a desire for status or material gain, but a striving for humane, healthy, safe work lives still denied to working class people in the U.S.

The ten white, working class lesbians I surveyed mentioned situations where exploitative violence in the workplace led to illness or disability. One woman writes, "When I stop to consider that my father had a heart attack at age 49, I try to imagine what his working life must have been like. He worked in a factory until he retired at age 55. About 15 years after he started there, he was promoted to foreman. . . He never talked about his work, but there must have been a lot of stress in his life. . . I would guess that his rise to foreman was a stressful thing."

Certainly, disability is a state familiar to working class people. One woman writes, "My great grandmother was a domestic all her life. Her daughter was a domestic until she became disabled." These survivors of work-related accidents appear regularly as strong characters in our non-fiction narratives. Their presence touches our lives deeply. We pay close attention to the creative ways they overcome pain and suffering, for we know their strategies will someday become ours.[26]

Since our tendency to pass performs such a primary role in the ways we live as white, working class lesbians, particularly in the ways we shift our reality to live that of someone else's, our community shares a concrete understanding that the disclosure of class location and sexuality are, in fact, always survival issues.

In my survey of ten self-identified, white, working class lesbians, this assessment yields some strikingly similar attitudes about the role passing plays as survival tool.[27] One example provides clarity--fitting in on the job.

A woman describes her experience in business, "As a fat woman, I already have to be smarter, prettier, faster, and better than all my workmates. As a working class woman I also must be better educated, even though I went to a state school. . . Most of all, I find it beneficial to be well-read and erudite about politics."

Another working class lesbian speaks candidly about her work, "I feel pressure to pass where people have power to control resources that I need, or where people can make decisions that affect my life. . . The economy is horrible and I wouldn't get another job soon if I were fired."

A third woman admits to very similar feeling. She says, "I feel most pressured to pass. . . when I want something from someone--[that is] a job, approval (like from family), [or] money."

Women make less money than men for comparable work, and working class women in particular have fewer job options. "On the average, a woman with a 4-year college education earns as much as a man with an eighth-grade education," writes Diane Schafter in the book Women, Power, and Policy: Towards the Year 2000[28] Consistently, fear of job loss and economic repraisal persist as a solid motivation for white, working class lesbian passing.[29]

Like a game of hide and seek, passing allows white, working class lesbians to dart back and forth between concealment and discovery, as we try harder and harder to create safe places for ourselves in hostile surroundings. Yet unlike a game, passing actually provides no "home free" base we can run to. The American Heritage Dictionary says that to hide is, "to put or keep out of sight. . . to prevent the disclosure or recognition of. . . to avert (one's gaze) in shame or grief." These definitions succinctly describe what long ago flooded our community--a profound grief--the shared sorrow of those that must hide in order to survive.

PART II -- ASSIMILATION

. . . and you know it's true
if you think about it
that the minute they want another trucker,
or dishwasher, or nursing home aide
for "back breaking work"
(that's what my Mom calls it)

they won't [care] how good you can act
like you're middle class. . .

don't forget it
don't forget it
if there's one thing you owe yourself
it is not to forget this truth

[1]

assimilation is a crock of shit

We white, working class lesbians demonstrate a tendency to assimilate to ruling societal norms, in terms of taking on the distinctive features of white, middle class, and heterosexist culture.[2] We do this because of the fact that only individuals who become white, middle class, and heterosexual survive in contemporary U.S. society.

The American Heritage Dictionary definition begins to explain the word "assimilation." Defined as, "the process whereby a group, as a minority or immigrant group gradually adopts the characteristics of another culture," assimilation takes on an active life. Unlike passing, which largely involves ways of masking and hiding, assimilation traps the individual self in an alien costume.

Interestingly, many people use the word "assimilation" when they discuss passing. They speak as if these two words are interchangeable; and certainly, the concepts have much in common. Yet crucial for our understanding is the realization that it is

not the word "assimilation" which so closely relates to passing, but the word "assimulation." Assimulation succinctly describes the impulse to feign, counterfeit, or simulate, and clearly operates as a useful synonym for passing. Confusing these definitions leads to an underestimation of the deadly power of assimilation.

Although the Paule Marshall novel Brown Girl, Brownstones deals poignantly and primarily with the issue of internalized oppression, it tells the story of assimilation as well. Selina Boyce, daughter of Barbadian immigrants, grows up in Brooklyn in the 1950's. She finds herself caught between the two worlds represented by her mother, who contorts herself to begin the process of assimilatation, and her father, who refuses to abandon his Barbadian values.

A driving force in the immigrant community, Selena's mother Silla leads a group of tightly knit, hard-working people fiercely carving a place in their new home. At a community business meeting in the neighborhood, one man expresses the sad but true message of assimilation, "We ain white yet. We's small timers! But we got our eye on the big time..."[3] This single-minded desire to be successful on white supremacist turf operates as a lifeline for some Barbadians.

However, an oppressive reality crushes characters who resist assimilation and refuse to grasp the lifeline of adopted values and ways. The characters Deighton Boyce, Selena's father, and Suggie Skeete, a kinswoman, both disobey the new rules in this "new world." Their actions lead to exile from an immigrant community discarding old values; such a rejection leads to

Deighton's eventual suicide.

Certainly, this story shows us how assimilation can tempt people with the sweet, material rewards of U.S. society and an avenue to a better life; yet it leaves a bitter taste in the mouth when one realizes how great and terrible loom the sacrifices for survival.

Sometimes the sacrifice for assimilation demands murder. In the short story "Desiree's Baby," by Kate Chopin, the reader meets a thoroughly assimilated man, Armand Aubigny. Never told by his adoptive, white parents that his mother is African-American, he lives life as a rich, white plantation owner.

His marriage to Desiree, a white woman, results in the birth of a child. As the baby grows, Armand becomes more angry and withdrawn. He realizes his child is not white, and this knowledge enrages him. Unaware of his heritage, he assumes Desiree to be a woman of color. He vents his fury on those people of color he holds captive. Chopin writes, ". . . the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves."[4]

As a testament to invisibility, Desiree does not even see her baby as different from any white child. Her ignorance resembles that of John Bellew in the novel Passing, who remains oblivious to his wife Clare's African-American ancestry. When Desiree slowly begins to see her baby, ". . . the blood turn[s] like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gather[s] upon her face."[5] It seems there exists no place in either of their lives for a child of color, even their own offspring--just as there

exists no place for a woman of color in John Bellew's life. This story chillingly exposes the white supremacist imperatives of U.S. society; for Armand then sends Desiree away from the plantation and she kills herself and the baby.

Not until after her and the baby's death does he find a letter documenting his heritage. In it, his adoptive, white mother thanks God for Armand's ignorance.[6] The story ends here, so the reader never discovers how or if Armand deals with this revelation.

We do discover, however, the sinister way assimilation encourages genocide--Armand effectively wipes out his family bloodline. Unlike his unfortunate child, Armand's light skin color guaranteed survival. In this way assimilation transforms individuals and communities over generations. They become "whites" in a white supremacist culture, because only whites survive in such a world; and they knowingly and unknowingly murder their own unassimilable children.[7]

Like a violent bootstamp, the survival strategy of assimilation appears throughout the life and work of poet Adrienne Rich. She writes, "I feel the history of denial within me like an injury, a scar. For assimilation has affected my perceptions; those early lapses in meaning, those blanks, are with me still."[8]

All of her identities--of which Jewish, lesbian, woman, and mother are only a few--struggle with this brutal U.S. imperative. This command issues the order to become heterosexual, think more like a man, observe christian rituals. Rich considers it life-threatening and elaborates:

> The pressure to assimilate says different things to different people: change your name, your accent, your nose; straighten or dye your hair; stay in the closet; pretend the Pilgrims were your fathers; become baptized as a christian; wear dangerously high heels, and starve yourself to look young, thin, and feminine; don't gesture with your hands; value elite European culture above all others; laugh at jokes about your own people; don't make trouble; defer to white men; smile when they take your picture; be ashamed of who you are.[9]

Rich experienced this imperative early in life. Her grandparents encouraged her father to deny his Jewish heritage in order to succeed professionally.[12] Rich writes that they, "sent their son into the dominant southern WASP culture[10] to become an 'exception', to enter the professional class."[11] As often happens to those who adopt alien values for survival, his experience reinforced an atmosphere of assimilation in their home, so much so that Rich developed no clear sense of herself as Jewish.[13]

Certainly, her experience exemplifies how assimilation expends the original self. Rich's father believed, like his parents, "With enough excellence, you could presumably make it stop mattering that you were Jewish. . . "[14] He deliberately kept her ignorant of her heritage. She writes, "We--my sister, mother and I--were constantly urged to. . . assimilate with a world which might see us as too flamboyant."[15]

Rich resented this pressure to assimilate. When trying to understand her father's abandonment of his identity, she posits, "I wonder if that isn't one message of assimilation--of America--that the unlucky or the unachieving want to pull you backward, that to identify with them is to court downward mobility, lose

the precious chance of passing, of token existence."[16]

This token existence often provides the only chance for survival of the marginalized--at what price life? Rich considers assimilation a cruel imperative, yet she acknowledges that choice is not part of this equation. She compassionately explains that, "Outsider is a condition which most people spend. . . great energy trying to deny or evade, through whatever kinds of assimilation or protective coloration they can manage."[17]

Rich understands the complex nature of assimilation very well.[18] She warns, ". . . if you unquestioningly accept one piece of the culture that despises and fears you, you are vulnerable to other pieces. . ."[19] In this way assimilation feeds more prejudice and bigotry into an already deadly system. Rich makes it clear that the assimilated become bearers of a racist, classist, and heterosexist banner, demanding assimilation from the next wave of immigrants and from their family members. Rich says these acculturated members of U.S. society act as, "part of American's devouring plan in which the persecuted, called to assimilation, learn that the price is to engage in persecution."[20]

Assimilation also tortures dreams, which oppressed groups desperately need to water the liberative imagination. She says, ". . . we are unable to imagine a future because we are deprived of the precious resource of knowing where we come from."[21] Adrienne Rich's words powerfully trumpet a call to resist assimilation.

As a "minority" culture in the U.S., white, working class lesbians live under siege. In response to this onslaught of

oppressions, we often succomb to the amnesia of assimilation by adopting the values and mannerisms of middle class and heterosexist culture. We give in to this partial or total loss of memory because of our unconscious understanding that only when an individual absorbs a middle class and heterosexual ethos will she survive in contemporary U.S. society. This apprehension reinforces the loss of our individual and collective memories. Without these recollections our tendency to assimilate increases.

Since only those individuals who obey the imperative to assimilate to middle class and heterosexual norms survive in contemporary U.S. society, those of us who claim working class and lesbian identities often mirror dominant ways of being. We demonstrate our obedience by taking on particular characteristics of middle class and heterosexist culture. For working class women, this may mean adopting middle-class speech patterns; for lesbians, it may mean couching relationship-talk in male/female terms. This imitation of governing attributes stages a dangerous theatre, however, because the fist of assimilation is a brutal director. It demands the transformation of our original flesh; eventually, we stare helplessly out from behind what is no longer a mask.[22]

We white, working class lesbians indeed have an inclination to assimilate to ruling standards in terms of adopting features exclusive to middle class and heterosexist culture. We strongly intuit the fact that only individuals who become middle class and heterosexual survive in contemporary U.S. society.

The ten white, working class lesbians surveyed for this

work expressed, through stories of their own lives, how this order to assimilate affects individuals and communities.

The justifications for assimilation can be found in myths of upward mobility. This fiction is fed to working class children at a young age. ". . . throughout childhood," one woman writes, "I got the (often unstated) message that I ought to be able to make it, get a good job and make lots of money when I grew up. In fourth grade, my teacher in school read us a Horatio Alger story. I was so moved by this story, that at age nine I decided to quit piano lessons (that my mother bartered for with a friend), and get a paper route. . . to begin to move up in the world."[23]

Certainly, this assimilation imperative is a racist one. One woman explains the way racism watchdogs immigrant communities and demands their complicity for survival. She writes, "Ethnically, my family was only one generation away on one side and two generations away on the other from 'the old country' as they said. My grandparents and parents were very conscious of ethnic and racial identities and had a definite hierarchy--they spoke in bigoted and racist terms daily. For some reason, I never liked it, never felt comfortable with it, and ultimately tried to figure out why hatred was so important a part of their lives. "

And in so many ways, assimilation alienates us from our past.[24] Working class lesbians who "move up" socially or professionally lose important ties. One white, working class lesbian speaks of the alienation of adopting values endemic to a dominant culture, "I've probably lost a connection with my past

which could be a source of security, comfort and add a richness to my life."[25]

Encouragingly, there does seem to exist in working class lesbians a healthy resistance to assimilation, even when we know a new, middle class identity can "save" us. "It seems to me," states one woman, "that working class people should be able to get an education, speak and write eloquently, and not be assumed to or accused of 'becoming middle class.' We are intelligent too."[26]

In the natural course of things, a butterfly emerges from a a caterpillar--this life changes dramatically from one distinct shape to another; yet, the two very dissimilar looking forms house the same individual creature. In this way, each butterfly flight grows from the will of the crawling caterpillar.

Like a diseased version of a quite healthy metamorphosis, assimilation works to truncate the human individual quite thoroughly. This marked change of appearance, attitudes, character, condition and function, unlike a natural metamorphosis, obliterates the original human will. Assimilation plants false dreams of flight in the consciousness. These dreams germinate in a soil fertilized with the deadly chemicals of self-hatred, and later feed a degenerate persona that most efficiently serves the culturally hegemonous interests of the dominant U.S. society.

PART III -- INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

> The women I love carry scars about their bellies. The bite of the dragon cut there early. If it hurt them, they forget it now, because who wants to remember pain? They say that men are just stronger than they are, better at some things. I have seen the shards of their dreams swept up and thrown away with the dirt on the floor.1

We white, working class lesbians internalize oppression. On a daily basis, we ingest the prevailing belief that such a social location predicates a morally and intellectually inferior gaze. This damaging conviction is based on the fact that only those people who ascribe to a white, middle class, heterosexist ethos are considered trustworthy moral agents[2] and intelligent thinkers in contemporary U.S. society.[3]

A critical component that informs the white, middle class, heterosexist ethos is a claim to superior morality and intelligence. Through institutions such as the church, this dominant ethos[4] controls rules of right conduct, based on an understanding of god informed by a patriarchal, familialist ideology where the father governs. This leadership is supposedly informed by superior reasoning abilities that no other members of the family (children of either sex or women) possess. By retaining control over academic institutions, these "fathers" perpetuate writing and research that supports their pre-eminence, and make claim to a superior objectivity. The ability to remain emotionally removed from a contestable issue while discussing it supposedly informs a judicial assessment.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines "internalize" as, "to take in (cultural values, for example) and make an integral

part of one's attitudes or beliefs." It defines "oppression" as, "a feeling of being heavily weighed down, either mentally or physically." Another source explains "oppression" as, "the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner." The Feminist Dictionary traces this word to the Latin opprimere,[5] the meanings of which "include: to press against, bear down, put down, crush, overwhelm, fall upon, take by surprise, suppress, conceal; and by late Latin. . .the forcible violation of a woman."[6]

"Internalized oppression," then, is what Malcolm X accurately termed "the rape of the psyche."[7] Indoctrinated by contemporary U.S. culture, and under considerable pressure to conform to these racist, classist, and heterosexist attitudes, the white, working class lesbian overpowers her self; she does the dirty, abusive work of degrading her own interests, welfare, and identity. Internalized oppression is the murderous dagger of ruling class authority upon which the white, working class lesbian impales her very being.

In this way, those who govern U.S. society use classism and heterosexism to sharpen the influence of power-over, and coerce the oppressed to do the dirty work of subjugation for them. Racism also critically hones this control, and together these dreadful systems contribute to our destruction.[8]

Internalized oppression begins its ruinous work at a young age; in the short story called "The Lesson," by Toni Cade Bambara, one scene poignantly describes internalized oppression in children. Miss Moore, a neighborhood grass-roots educator,

takes a group of impoverished, African-American children to a pretentious, upper class toystore in New York City, where they learn a devastating lesson about the unequal distribution of wealth in U.S. society.

Outside the store, the kids crack jokes about the amazingly exorbitant prices of the toys--such as four hundred and eighty dollars ($480) for a paperweight and one thousand, one hundred ninety-five dollars ($1,195) for a sailboat. They exitedly pick out toys they like, and try to estimate how long it would take them to save up their allowances in order to buy them. The narrator, Sylvia, says, "me and Sugar [was] screamin, 'This is mine, that's mine, I gotta have that, that was made for me, I was born for that. . ."[9]

This frivolity ends, however, when Miss Moore suggests they go into the store. Suddenly, the kids stop laughing. They stand quietly, unwilling to enter where they unconsciously know they don't belong. All bravado gone, Sylvia explains her feelings of embarrassment and unworthiness. In so doing, she aptly describes the debilitating effect of internalized oppression. Standing outside the store, she thinks to herself,

> . . . not that I'm scared [to go in], what's there to be afraid of, just a toy store. But I feel funny, shame. But what I got to be shamed about? Got as much right to go in as anybody. But somehow I can't seem to get hold of the door, so I step away for Sugar to lead. But she hangs back too. And I look at her and she looks at me and this is ridiculous. I mean, damn, I have never ever been shy about doing nothing. . .[10]

Because these children live in the context of racist and classist U.S. society, they take in negative messages about their

identities. These disparaging messages become a powerful inner voice. Internalized oppression functions as an invisible armed guard posted outside the toystore to frighten and intimidate Sylvia and her friends.

This armed guard commits murder as well, violently shattering the hopes, dreams and bodies of the oppressed.[11] Not only the individual suffers from this devastation. Internalized oppression weakens the community; it reduces the collective, liberative imagination. Oppressed communities desperately need this inspiration as a resource for resistance in the midst of unbearably harsh tribulations.[12]

One example of how the loss of the individual diminishes community is well illustrated in Sherley Anne William's novel Dessa Rose, set in eighteenth-century, U.S. slavocracy.[13] The character Kaine, an enslaved African-American, dreams of being a musician.[14] After hearing an African man play the banjo, he builds one of his own.

Kaine's persona exudes the liberating joyfulness of music--the love and life it brings sparkles in his eyes. It strengthens his will to survive. His music contributes to the life of the community; a soft and gentle tune soothes his partner Dessa to sleep after a long day in the fields; a playful ditty lightens other peoples misery; a mournful dirge laments their slavery. Dessa describes his gift, "Kaine could always give you something to laugh about, changing words with the men, teasing the women. He made jokes on the banjo. . ."[15]

In a singularly malicious act, the plantation master smashes Kaine's banjo. In so doing, he destroys the music and the man.

Spirit crushed, Kaine's sense of self withers. Even though Dessa finds the wood and horsehair he needs, Kaine cannot find strength to build another banjo. The raw materials of his dream lie useless before him. He despondently says to Dessa, "Masa can make another one . . . Nigga can't do shit. Masa can step on a nigga hand, nigga heart, nigga life, and what can a nigga do? Nigga can't do shit."[16]

Kaine loses his struggle against a heavy-handed, daily oppression, and internalizes this deadly authority. He eventually physically strikes out at the plantation master in what might seem on the surface a positively vengeful act. However, a desire for death, not life, motivates Kaine. Of course, he knows that such insubordination results in death; this suicidal impulse indicates the severity of Kaine's internalized oppression. When a suffering this terrible is ingested, dreams wither, hope vanishes, and people die.[17]

Brazilian-born educator Paulo Freire well understands the way internalized oppression brutally uproots the lives of individuals and the aspirations of communities.[18] In his years of experience developing effective pedagogy for literacy, he worked closely with communities of people under siege from tyrannical governments. He witnessed--many times over--the eroding effects of internalized oppression. In his book Education for Critical Consciousness he writes:

> unfortunately, what happens to a greater or lesser degree in the various 'worlds' into which the world is divided is that the ordinary person is crushed, diminished, converted into a spectator, maneuvered by myths which powerful social forces have created. These myths turn

> against [one]; they destroy and annihilate [the person]."[19]

Such myths, strengthened by the power of the primordial origin they lay claim to, rigidly hold in place a dominating ideology, the sole purpose of which is to reflect the social, political, and economic aspirations of the governing class.[20] Freire considers this fiction a most insidious tool; he writes, "Perhaps the greatest tragedy of modern [humanity] is [its] domination by the force of these myths."[21]

Freire usefully describes the internalization of oppression as a process. This system, progressing over time, advances the agenda of those in power by erasing the critical consciousness of oppressed groups.[22] Critical consciousness is the thought, will and perception one uses to exercise careful and exact evaluation of the merits, faults, value or truth of a matter. Freire explains the eradication of consciousness in this way:

> [People] were crushed by the power of the landlords, the governors, the captains, the viceroys. Intro-jecting this external authority, [they] developed a consciousness which 'housed oppression," rather than [a] free and creative consciousness . . .[23]

In this statement, and indeed in all of his writing, he cautions us that the internally oppressed individual provides living quarters for those who dominate her. She unconsciously harbors authoritative attitudes, based on whatever racist, classist, or heterosexist beliefs prevail in her culture. Freire warns that lodging such degrading notions proves dangerous. He writes, "when [people] try to save themselves by following . . . prescriptions, they drown in leveling anonymity, without hope and without faith, domesticated and adjusted."[24]

We white, working class lesbians live in a culture based on hateful beliefs that negate our very being. Internalized classism and heterosexism are the visitors we house. These unwelcome guests bring hopelessness with them, daily repeating the false allegation that our moral and intellectual capabilities are inferior. The rationalization for this dubious notion--that is, a supposed lack of judgment and shortage of brainpower on our part--rests solidly on the self-aggrandizing myth that the only trustworthy moral agents and creative thinkers in contemporary U.S. society are those people who ascribe to a white, middle class, heterosexist ethos.

The arrogance implicit in the belief that only those who support this suffocating ethos are reliable moral agents and formative thinkers wields a haughty, overbearing power. White, working class lesbians internalize this offensive attitude. We swallow poisonous, domineering biases that high-handedly posit our moral and intellectual inferiority.

Certainly, we white, working class lesbians internalize oppression by ingesting the prevailing belief that our social location predicates a moral and intellectual inferiority. This damaging conviction is based on the fact that only those people who sustain a white, middle class, heterosexist ethos receive credit for being valid moral agents and original thinkers in contemporary U.S. society.

A devastating illustration of the effects of such myths of superiority is found in my survey of ten white, working class lesbians. Attitudes throughout the survey indicate serious

levels of internalized oppression. Most women included disclaimers, apologizing for things in their responses such as writing style and word choice. Their replies poignantly describe an effort to become whole, moral agents--to make decisions based on their experience of right and wrong in the context of white, working class, and lesbian experience. They admit to an ongoing struggle to think of themselves as "smart." Daily, they hear and deal bravely with messages that tell them they exercise bad judgement and faulty thought.

One woman tells a story that describes the powerful, insidious nature of internalized oppression. She says, "I had a chance to go to a private girls school on scholarship. . . and my parents said "no," they couldn't dress me right--I'd never fit in. So I did not take the opportunity. I always felt it was a way I could have changed my life. Later I was again invited to apply to [a private women's college] and did not--this time I had internalized the reasons."

Internalized oppression fragments us. We are unable to do constructive, self-affirming work when we are in pieces. One woman, a British citizen, shares a vivid critical analysis, "Spending most of my time at school, especially as a teenager, with the middle class people, was crucial in my internalizing classism. The English are masters of creating the institutions and psychological climate wherein the oppressed contribute to their own subjugation. . . So for much of my life I have stumbled around, disoriented. . . the root of my confusion was firmly embedded in the middle class colonization of my self. [I've been] fragmented for a long time and in pain, without a strong

sense of self, without dignity. . . the most significant loss was my self."[25]

Provacatively, another working class lesbian speaks of the internalization of oppressive values as her only way to survive classist, heterosexist institutions. She states, ". . . it was in learning those values--internalizing them--that I got through school. I would never have made it on my own without adopting another persona . . . [Yet my greatest] loss has been not understanding myself. Not being able to see what was going on--why I often felt depressed, lonely, and very sad."

The internalization of oppression always cuts us off from our true selves. It makes sure we are unable to utilize valuable resources for our healthy survival. One woman writes, ". . . I have spent a lot of my working and school life in a kind of fog, lacking the sharpness of my working-class wit and judgment, not having access to that grain of truth that my experience as a working class woman gives me."

Sharpened on the vicious whetstone of racist, classist, and heterosexist intolerance, internalized oppression slices up the soul. It diminishes our spirit, courage, and resolution. Deprived of these resources, our power wastes away. Without qualities of animation, fortitude, and determination, we lose the capacity to feel pain, we no longer draw back from it, and we become numb.

Stunned from a life of daily oppression, white, working class lesbians lose consciousness. We no longer feel the sharp pain within. A fitful sleep overtakes us. This sleep is a

desperate attempt at survival. It is a strategy based on the wisdom taught us by our bodies each night--that sleep refreshens and strengthens. However, in this grievous sleep brought on by unbearable pain, we intermittently wake and sleep, never quite resting. We pass in and out of consciousness. This imposed respite keeps us exhausted, groggy and unable to defend ourselves from attack; this deadly sleep claims healing power, but it can do nothing to mend our wounds.

CONCLUSION

Say goodnight to your mother
and turn out the light
she's working the late shift tonight

where it's bedpans, or dishpans, or factory machines
from midnight till eight in the morning

Justice is working her way back to us
I know she's working her way back . . .1

To conclude, one must be willing to reach a decision or form an opinion about a matter. This proves no small task when considering the issue of passing in the lives of white, working class lesbians. Reached after careful deliberation, my conclusions reflect my faith in "common sense."[2] My mother encouraged me to practice this innate good judgement often.

Although many threads of thought weave in and out of the preceding pieces on passing, assimilation, and internalized oppression, I lift up the following four for consideration: As white, working class lesbians, I suggest that : 1) we love and revere life, 2) we trust passing as an effective survival strategy, 3) we underestimate the power of forces estranged from the well-spring of life, and 4) we discount the power of what I call our "ethic of good will."[3]

First of all, I believe we white, working class lesbians use passing as a survival strategy primarily because we love and revere life. This love for life logically encourages us to protectively conceal our identities when in danger.

In my survey on passing in the lives of white, working class lesbians, a joyful reverence for life springs forth, even in the face of adversity. One woman expresses this best when she says,

"I get in touch with my spirit when I sing;. . . when I am conscious of sunshine, snow, the wind, the ocean, trees, cats, the earth; when I am in the company of women, and the very odd man, who dare stand against death dealing. My spirit responds positively to that which is biophilic, life-loving. And it responds with rage and pain to that which is necrophilic, death-loving."[4]

Secondly, I think our white, working class lesbian community puts trust in passing as an effective survival strategy. Unfortunately, this confidence contributes to an oversight of the fact that passing leads to our spiritual, intellectual, and physical demise. I believe we seriously discount the suffocating power of assimilation and internalized oppression.

A healthy suspicion of passing appeared throughout the surveys. Most women felt pressured to pass, and wished other choices existed. Many felt passing to be so thoroughly informed by classist and heterosexist assumptions as to be imposed upon them. Yet, all agreed that passing did work in their favor often enough to inform their basic trust of it.

"I pass because that is the best way to survive," admits one woman surveyed, "We all do it. That's the only way to make it out. Unless you pass, no amount of money or connecting or work or lotto tickets or prayer can get you out. . . we are here to fill the holes with whatever cement we can find."

Thirdly, I feel we white, working class lesbians have a tendency to forget, at our peril, that the powers pressuring us to pass gain momentum daily in contemporary U.S. society. When

we continue to insist that passing operates as an adequate survival strategy, we underestimate the power of death-worshipping forces, long estranged from the well-spring of life.

Most of the women surveyed expressed frustration with the issue of passing. Passing looms in their lives like a many-headed hydra; no single attempt they make seems to be able to eradicate it. Unfortunately, this powerlessness clogs up our reasoning abilities. It prevents us from seeing that the death-dealing might of our oppressors is increasing, while our own strategy of passing holds the same risky chance.

One woman expresses this immobilization very clearly, "I hate passing, I hate the way it feels like I'm pushing down a very big part of myself, into a little box in my gut. I hate the fact that diversity on every level is not tolerated in so many places in this society. . . I hate having to weigh the possibilities of being punished for who I am. . ."

Finally, and most critically I believe, we discount our white, working class lesbian "ethic of good will." We do this by not drawing out values inherent in our community which could lead to new, life-affirming survival strategies and eventually to the transformation of corrupt structures.[5] We remain unaware of the power an ethic of good will holds.[6]

There certainly appeared throughout the surveys what I would call a <u>common</u> value.[7] This value informs a strong sense of community interest; each woman spoke of passing as a community issue, not simply a personal one. This leads me to believe that faithful exploration of our shared ethic will provide us with enough imaginative energy to create alternatives, so that we no

longer rely on passing to survive.[8]

One woman expresses what I consider a basic example of an ethic of good will. She writes, "I make the best of what is and make do materially, partly because it's a survival strategy, but also because it's an ethical and creative way of living. . . My friends are important to me and community is key. I share what I have even when I don't have much. My house is open to folk and I believe in feeding them!"[9]

Dug deep in a central place, a well provides a community with many important things. A place to gather, to share stories, to draw up the sweet water of life, and to labor for deeper founts of understanding, the well replenishes our community with consistent sustenance and celebration. When we allow this well to dry up, we die of thirst.[10]

Therefore, since we white, working class lesbians are people full of good will, always ready to render a favor to one who needs it even if we get nothing in return, and since we trust in the sagacious knowledge of common sense, and since we believe in a divine spirit that bestows love and protection freely on humankind, then let us make an agreement with one another.[11] Let us agree to <u>draw up</u>, <u>drink in</u>, and <u>dig out</u> in order to stop averting our gaze from the seriousness of our situation. If we do these three things, I believe our critical focus will shift, and we will be able to cleary locate the source of our strength in the life-giving waters of an ethic of good will.

By "draw up," I mean that we should encourage these waters to flow forth from our hearts and minds. Intuitively, we know we

have survived for a reason. But so many of our sisters have not. It is our responsibility, then, to turn to those values that provide us with stamina and courage, and lift them up.

We must then share these sweet, hard-won handfuls of water with each other. This is what I describe when I say "drink in." We are a thirsting people. The drought imposed by death-worshipping powers has lasted much longer than just our lives; a collective thirst parches us. Taking fresh life into ourselves will bathe the wounds we suffer--the pain of internalized oppression, for instance. The waters drawn from a well such as ours contain strong healing.

Lastly, but most importantly, as white, working class lesbians we must not forget to "dig out." What I am saying here is that we must remember racism taints our ethic of good will. It seeps into the ground water of our consciousness. Not only people of color are killed by racist poison. A large part of the reason our bodies and spirits remain so weak, racism impedes our ability to imagine alternatives to passing. We must recognize the connections between our community and communities of color, for we oppress ourselves when oppressing others.[12]

Just as a well must be re-drilled regularly in order to provide clean, drinkable water, so we must faithfully labor to deeply re-examine our values, as to insure that any life-affirming strategies we propose using our ethic of good will embrace a whole-hearted justice for all.[13]

APPENDIX I -- ORIGIN OF THE IDEA

Suzanne Pharr, author of Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism (*) planted the seed for this work at a Simmons College lecture in 1990. At one point in this lecture Pharr suggested that "out" lesbians demonstrate compassionate understanding for those lesbian sisters who pass to survive. As a white, working class lesbian who passes, I asked Pharr if she thought there existed a relationship between sexual identity passing and class passing. She said it was a very good question!

This inquiry grew into a paper entitled "The Politics of Passing: White, Working Class Lesbians Incognito," written as a final paper for the course "Feminist Theology and Ethics," team-taught by Dr. Francine Cardman and Dr. Judith Dwyer at the Weston School of Theology. Some of the questions raised in that paper were, what does it mean when lesbians use the word "passing" to describe an understanding of themselves living incognito as heterosexual? What does it mean as well when members of the U.S., white, working class use this word when adapting to the value systems of the white middle class?

These questions sprouted into my Master's thesis, the first part of a four chapter exploration of passing in the lives of white, working class lesbians. I intend to continue this project in my PhD program beginning fall 1991 at Emory University in Atlanta.

(*) Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism, by Suzanne Pharr, Chardon Press, Little Rock, AR, 1988.

APPENDIX II -- METHODOLOGY

Emancipatory Historiography

To organize this project, I use The Reverend Dr. Katie G. Cannon's Emancipatory Historiography method, which consists of four steps: 1) analytical constructs, 2) structure of historical development (institutional constraints), 3) shared disposition (culture), and 4) collective action (see Diagram 1). She describes this method as, "explicit historical, socioethical analysis aimed to connect our historical narratives of specific, experienced contestable issues to the broader historical framework" (Cannon, "Emancipatory Historiography and Medical Ethics," lecture notes).

For this thesis, I utilize the first step, "analytical constructs." The five constructs related to passing I have chosen to analyze include: passing, assimilation, internalized oppression, tokenism and accomodation. In this paper I explore the first three of these.

Dr. Isaac R. Clark's Homiletical Method

To flesh out this framework, I speak using Dr. Clark's homiletical method, as taught by Dr. Cannon in her course, "Ethical Themes for Relevant Preaching." Beginning with the "origin of the idea," the powerful crux of this methodology consists of the "sermonic problem," which asks the deceptively simple questions: what, how, and why? It requires the use of a "why crisis" to gauge the pathos, ethos, logos, and theos of a particular community. This method encourages, as well, the development of relevant metaphors to stretch the examination of the contestable issue (see Diagram 2).

DIAGRAM 1

EMANCIPATORY HISTORIOGRAPHY (*)
(connecting historical narratives of a contestable issue to the broader historical framework)

1

Analytical Constructs

* Employ "experience-distant" concepts to clarify the contestable issue

*Define those concepts

* Develop model of logic as a benchmark to assess deviations

4

Collective Action

* What motivational constructs may or may not act together to transform disposition or behavior?

* Recover social memory-- lift up the history of resistance to oppression

* Demonstrate collective human agency

2

Historical Development

* "Experience-near" study

* How does this group of people actually live?

* What institutional constraints are imposed upon them?

3

Shared Disposition

* Determine the shared race/sex/class understanding of a group about the contestable issue

* Construct a cognitive map of the terrain of lived experience

(*) excerpted from the notes "Emancipatory Historiography and Medical Ethics," by Dr. Katie G. Cannon.

DIAGRAM 2

DR. ISAAC R. CLARK'S HOMILETICAL METHOD
(as used in this thesis)

1

Origin of the Idea

* "a-ha" experience, click, consciousness-raised

2

Definition

* sermonic problem asks what, how, why?
* "we have a tendency to_____(what)_____,
in terms of _____(how)_____,
due to _____(why)_____."

3

Elaboration

* flip the sermonic problem three times:

(a)	(b)	(c)
what	how	why
how	why	what
why	what	how

4

Exemplification

* the "show me"--examples that clearly illustrate the what, how, why

5

Justification

* why crisis
* gauge the pathos, ethos, logos, and theos of your audience
* remember they will ask the question, "SO WHAT?"
* construct a relevant metaphor for illustration

APPENDIX III -- SURVEY OF WHITE, WORKING CLASS LESBIANS

Data used in this paper come from a survey on passing I designed for white, working class lesbians. Ten women who self-identify as such participated in the study. I reached these women through word of mouth and advertisements in the Episcopal Divinity School Bulletin. Constructed in questionnaire form, the survey consists of a brief, ten question demographics form followed by twelve essay questions. Most women wrote 5-10 pages in response and returned the survey within three weeks of receiving it.

The demographics form asks the questions: what is your age, what is your racial/ethnic heritage, what is your religious heritage, how do you name your spiritual self today, describe your educational background (current level), what kind of environment do you live in primarily (rural/farm, suburb, urban), what is your occupation, what is your average yearly income, you are a citizen of what country, and in what region of that country have you lived the longest?

The demographic results illustrate that the average age of the ten participants was in the range of 25-34 years of age (see Figure 1). The racial/ethnic heritage of those surveyed was primarily northern european, with the exception of one woman, who claims some native american heritage as well. All participants were raised in the Christian tradition, from fundamentalist Protestantism to Roman Catholicism. Significantly, none of these women now remain in the Christian tradition. They do, however, all still claim a spiritual self. They name this in a variety of

ways, using terms such as witch, post-christian, and humanist (see Table 1). The survey was skewed towards a high level of educational background, with all women as college graduates or above (see Figure 2). The kind of environment these women live in is primarily urban. Their occupations are student, cleaner, teacher, psychotherapist, word processor, marketing director, and research associate. All women but one make less than $30,000 per year (See Figure 2). Most women claim U.S. citizenship. One woman is a Canadian citizen, however and another is a citizen of Great Britain (UK).

The main body of the survey, based on Marvin Ellison's "Social Strata Inventory" and Carter Heyward and Bev Harrison's "Life-Journey Questionnaire" asks these questions:

1. How do you define "passing?" When is the first time you heard this word? What was the context in which you heard it being used?

2. What metaphors or images come to mind when you think of passing?

3. When did you know you were a lesbian? What is the story of your coming out process? Does passing play a part in this story? If so, how?

4. How has your religious heritage influenced the way you think about your lesbianism? How has your lesbianism influenced the way you think about your religious heritage?

5. How do you define your spirituality today? Does passing have an influence on that spirituality? If so, in what ways?

6. How do you explain your identification as working class? How has your race or ethnicity influenced your class consciousness? How has passing played a part in your life as a working class woman?

7. What were the stated and unstated assumptions about passing in your family? How was passing viewed? Was it ever talked about? As a child, what was your understanding of your parents' passing? Do you know what your parents did to pass? If not, why not, and how did that shape your own attitude about passing?

8. What is your passing history? What kinds of passing have you done? What passing skills do you have? What kinds of passing have you done in the workplace or institutions such as church, school, home, and family?

9. In what situations do you feel most pressured to pass?

10. What are your attitudes about passing? If you had an absolute choice, what would you do about your passing?

11. In relation to passing, what has been your most significant gain? Your most significant loss?

12. Any other comments about passing?

FIGURE 1

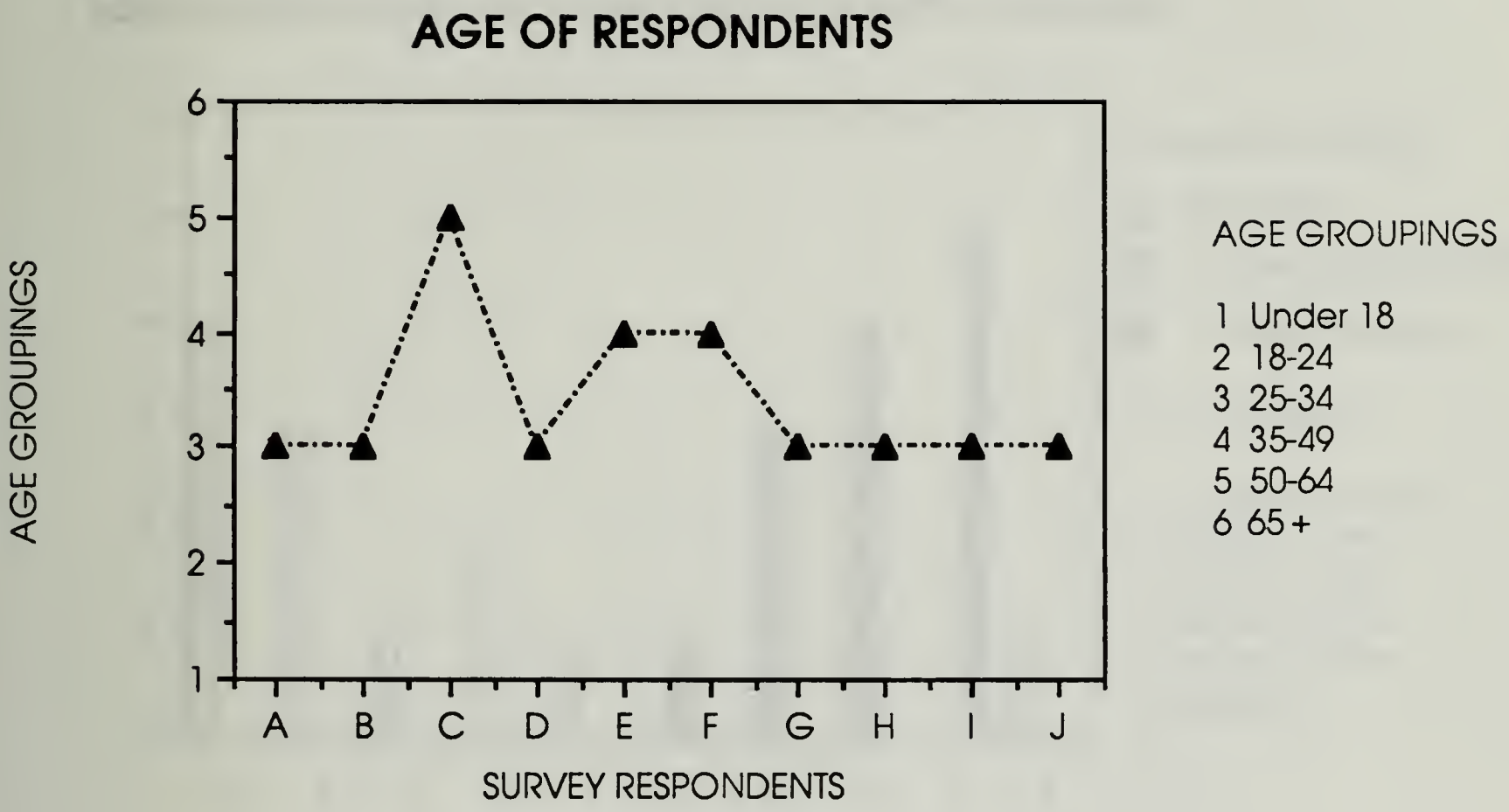
AGE OF RESPONDENTS
AGE GROUPINGS
6
5
4
3
2
1
A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J
SURVEY RESPONDENTS
AGE GROUPINGS
1 Under 18
2 18-24
3 25-34
4 35-49
5 50-64
6 65+

FIGURE 2

EDUCATION AND INCOME LEVEL OF RESPONDENTS

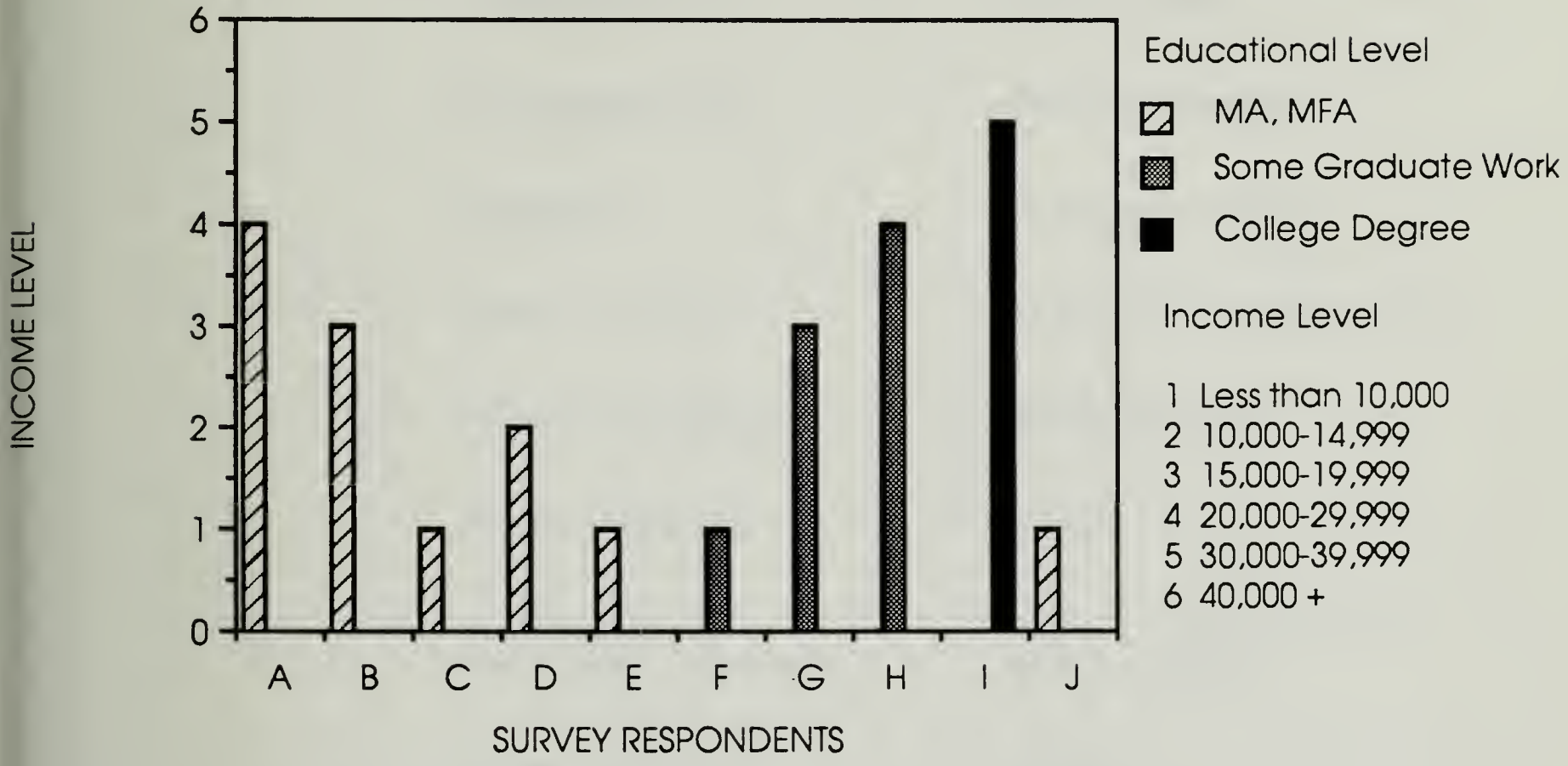

TABLE 1

SPIRITUAL NAMING

Respondent	Religious Heritage	Spiritual Naming Today
A	Christian Reformed	Life-ist
B	Presbyterian	Witch/Pagan
C	Congregational	Post-christian
D	Methodist	Humanist Pagan
E	Roman Catholic	Feminist Lesbian Witch
F	Church of England	Woman Alive!
G	Roman Catholic	Pagan
H	Fundamentalist and Irish Catholic	Dianic Pagan, Witch, Earth-keeper
I	Roman Catholic	Witch
J	Methodist	Pantheist

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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Rich, loc. cit.

17
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CONCLUSION

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